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## Review of *Above Time: Emerson's and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions* by James R. Guthrie

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*Above Time: Emerson's and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions.* By James R. Guthrie. Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 2001. xi + 262 pp.

James R. Guthrie's *Above Time* builds on Robert D. Richardson's two superb biographies, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986) and *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995). Richardson is by far the most frequently cited scholar in *Above Time*, and his influence is also reflected in Guthrie's measured, accretive writing style. Richardson's books chart the intellectual development of Emerson and Thoreau, primarily through records of their reading. While Richardson's projects are enormously successful on their own terms, these very terms limit the scope of his discussion: to craft a balanced biography, it is not advisable, or even possible, to delve into any one topic too deeply. Guthrie, by contrast, deliberately confines himself to one topic: Emerson's and Thoreau's uses of time, and within this topic, he concentrates largely on their scientific thinking. The result is a dense, rich text that is informative rather than polemical, and that draws provocative links between changing nineteenth-century scientific notions of time (its origins, duration, and meaning) and Emerson's and Thoreau's own (continually changing) depictions of temporal processes.

Scholars of Transcendentalism commonly assume that Emerson and Thoreau wanted to "transcend" time, since their writings so often posit an ideal vision of the present moment—a moment located, to quote "Self-Reliance," "above time." And yet, as Guthrie argues in his first chapter, "A History of Time," the competing theories of Charles Lyell, Louis Agassiz, Charles Darwin, and others were redefining the very nature of time for both Emerson and Thoreau. Time was no longer coterminous with human history; instead, it was emerging as vast, secular, directionless, and cyclical. Guthrie draws on Stephen Jay Gould's metaphors in *Time's Arrow*, *Time's Cycle* to show how geologic insights slowly altered Western assumptions about time's linear progress. Although this first chapter is about Emerson, it also applies to Thoreau, making the broader point that both men were continually assimilating the new scientific theories of the era.

Many of Guthrie's smaller points in "A History of Time" are metaphorically suggestive. For instance, he distinguishes between two geological models of how change occurs across time: Charles Lyell's "uniformitarianism" versus Georges Cuvier's "catastrophism." This distinction is useful in reading Emerson, spurring the question: does change take place gradually, as the world alters steadily and incrementally, or does change occur more fitfully, through literal and metaphorical floods and earthquakes? Guthrie argues that Emerson was largely a uniformitarian who—later in his career, after the death of his son Waldo—also made a place for catastrophism. This very concrete geologist's-eye view of Emersonian time is

a nice scientific counterbalance to the usual German philosophical/Hegelian perspective.

Guthrie's remaining six chapters alternate between Emerson and Thoreau. Overall, Emerson emerges as more conflicted and less able to truly absorb the ramifications of the science he read. Chapter three, "Circles and Lines," shows how Emerson clings to linearity while it also interrogates exactly what "lines" mean to Emerson. The high points here are Guthrie's surprising readings of Emerson's poems: "Uriel," "Experience," and "Days." Chapter five, "Answering the Sphinx," tackles Emerson's notion of metamorphosis, again with incisive close readings—although in this case, the enormity of the topic clouds Guthrie's focus. The best sections deal with Emerson's anticipation of genetics, while sections addressing Emerson's classical influences seem less original.

The chapters on Thoreau depict him as exceptionally open to large-scale temporal cycles—in contrast to Emerson, who was more humanistic and progressive. Chapter two, "'My Carnac' and Memnon's Head," identifies a key anxiety in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: how can Thoreau, a relentless presentist, construct an appropriate memorial to his brother, John? Guthrie suggests that *A Week* functions as an experimental memorial, one that makes several forms of time (geologic, mythical, calendrical) simultaneously available and that posits memory as an experience in itself—a kind of present-tense performance of the past. In this chapter, Guthrie begins a discussion that lasts through the rest of the book, arguing that, although Thoreau is often seen as dismissing the past, he is actually working to integrate new scientific ideas about time into his own local, human-scaled history. The other two Thoreau chapters (chapter four, "The Walking Stick, the Surveyor's Staff, and the Corn in the Night," and chapter six, "Inches Wood") pursue Thoreau's single-minded expansion of "the moment," arguing that Thoreau's scientism adds a *spatial* dimension, like rings in a tree trunk, to the present tense.

Guthrie's prose style is uniformitarian rather than catastrophist; that is, he gradually accrues information and examples rather than relying on big, splashy arguments. This approach sometimes slows the text's information-flow, burying its most exciting ideas, although it is well worth the reader's time to excavate them. Another minor weakness actually stems from one of the book's strengths: while Guthrie's focus is admirably narrow, it can lead him to exclude larger critical conversations that seem germane. For instance, where are the Puritans, whose distinctive ideas about time have been outlined by Sacvan Bercovitch? Minor quibbles notwithstanding, *Above Time* is a fascinating read: grounded in concrete science and yet metaphorically suggestive, it adds new dimensions to the study of Transcendentalism.

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